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SUBJECT: COALITION LEADERS SETTLE ON HOLDING SECOND
DEMOCRATIC CONGRESS

REF: MINSK 1141

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) The United Democratic Forces (UDF) Political Council recently agreed to convene a second congress of democratic forces on March 25, 2007. The decision was included in the Political Council's approved "Agreement on the UDF Political Campaign" that also called for the creation of a Political Council Chair and the restructuring of the UDF hierarchy. Also approved was a manifesto "The Path to Freedom" - the coalition's united message. The UDF demonstrated more solidarity in approving the documents, but senior coalition leaders remind us that the true gauge of cooperation is concrete action. End summary.

Congress To Convene, Political Council Chair Created

¶12. (C) On October 23, Belarusian National Front (BNF) Deputy Chairman Viktor Ivashkevich gave Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff a copy of the "Agreement on the UDF Political Campaign" the Political Council (PC) approved on October 20. The most significant concept in the agreement was the decision to convene the second congress of democratic forces on March 25, 2007, ending months of stalemate within the UDF. Another issue resolved in the document was the decision to create an executive position with limited powers, the PC Chair, who will appoint the heads of the UDF executive body ("Secretariat") and the UDF shadow government committee ("National Committee"). Coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich had long opposed a second congress unless an executive leadership position with broad powers was established (reftel). Leader of the Belarusian Communist Party Sergey Kalyakin opposed the idea, claiming a restructured PC would suffice. According to Ivashkevich, the PC eventually found a middle ground and created the PC Chairmanship, but not a general UDF leader with broad powers as Milinkevich had hoped.

PC Restructured in New UDF Hierarchy

¶13. (SBU) The agreement stipulates that the congress is the supreme representative body of the UDF that approves coalition strategies and policies. The second in authority is the Political Council, which the congress will restructure. Delegates at the congress will gather in their

respective factions (political parties or NGOs) and appoint their representatives to the PC. Factions are allowed one PC representative for every 30 delegates.

14. (SBU) The congress will also establish the Presidium, the third-tier authority that resembles the current PC in composition. Faction leaders and the PC Chair will automatically become members of the Presidium and other members will be chosen by the congress. The Presidium will coordinate UDF operations by consensus. If no consensus is reached, the issue will be referred to the PC, where it will be resolved by a simple majority.

The Price of a Delegate to the Congress - 300 Signatures

15. (SBU) According to the agreement, delegates to the congress would be those campaigning for local council seats or places on territorial electoral committees who collect three hundred signatures of support. NGO and civil society activists and volunteers not involved in the elections must also gather 300 signatures, but in support of the UDF's manifesto "The Path to Freedom" (see para 7). Individuals with fewer than 300 signatures could form a group, combine each other's signatures together to reach the threshold, and select a delegate from among them.

Counting Commissions: A Mirror of the CEC

16. (SBU) According to the agreement, the UDF is to establish a Central Counting Commission (CCC) during local council elections. The CCC, formed by the Political Council to mirror the GOB's Central Election Commission (CEC), is to ensure local council candidates and their initiative groups

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are adhering to CEC campaign rules, help individuals register as candidates to local councils, resolve internal disputes, cancel UDF registration of candidates committing violations, and verify signature lists.

The "United" Coalition Message

17. (C) Ivashkevich also gave Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff the UDF manifesto "The Path to Freedom," the coalition's united message originally created by the Belarusian Assembly of Democratic NGO's during the 2006 presidential campaign. The document states the UDF's goals to destroy the GOB-created farce of a "flourishing" Belarus, remind the authorities of their illegal hold on power, help people overcome fear, and convince Belarusians that alternative forces capable of bringing change and defending Belarus' independence exist. The manifesto also demands the GOB free political prisoners, promote independent media, release Belarusians from the restrictive contract system, be truthful about Belarusian-Russian relations, promote free elections, and allow citizens to freely express their opinions.

18. (C) All UDF members and opposition candidates in the local council elections are to adopt the manifesto and gather signatures of support. According to the document's fine print, support for UDF-backed local council candidates is equivalent to supporting the manifesto. Affiliated NGOs, civil society groups, and other pro-democracy individuals not involved in the local council elections would also promote the manifesto and gather signatures.

Regional Councils to Coordinate Election Campaigns

19. (SBU) Aside from the two documents, the PC also agreed to form regional councils, made up of regional political party leaders, to coordinate the campaigns of UDF candidates. BNF Deputy Chairmen Aleksey Yanukevich explained to Poloff

October 26 that the councils would distribute campaign materials to candidates, inform them on decisions/instructions from the UDF, and provide needed material and moral support. Yanukevich, however, could not predict when the councils would be formed.

"For Freedom" Movement Put On Hold

¶10. (C) Ivashkevich informed Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff that Milinkevich announced at the Political Council that the start of his "For Freedom" movement would be postponed until after the local elections, citing lack of preparation. (Note: Only a couple hours before the Political Council meeting, Milinkevich claimed to Ambassador that his movement was ready to begin work and would likely nominate candidates for the local council elections (reftel). End note.) Ivashkevich viewed the movement as Milinkevich's push to create his own political party, castigating it as a "naked idea" lacking a planning committee and direction. He noted that BNF leader Vintsuk Vyachorka was holding negotiations with Milinkevich about the movement, but the former was remaining cautious of Milinkevich's intentions in collaborating with the BNF.

Comment

¶11. (C) After months of stagnation and infighting within the UDF, the opposition leaders have made significant progress on the issue of holding another democratic congress. However, Ivashkevich and others have cautioned that the agreements are simply on paper; in reality, no one can be forced to comply. Milinkevich finally received what he wanted out of the deal - a de jure leadership position - although the Political Council made it clear that the position's powers would be less than what he had hoped. The UDF further demonstrated that some level of solidarity still existed within the coalition by successfully establishing a unified message that many disgruntled activists had been waiting for for six months. However, the real test for the UDF is to see how quickly and efficiently they can act.

Stewart